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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

The Communist Winter-Spring Offensive in South Vietnam

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7 February 1972

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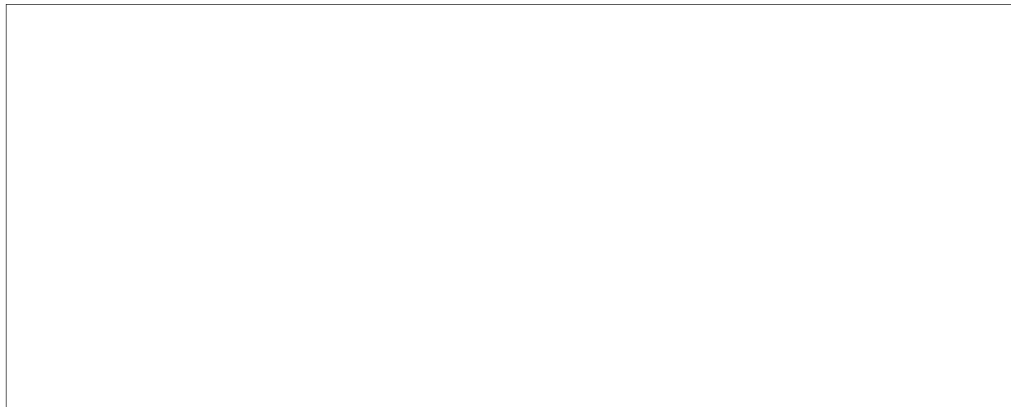
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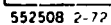
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THE COMMUNIST WINTER-SPRING OFFENSIVE
IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
7 February 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Communist Winter-Spring Offensive
in South Vietnam

Introduction

Although the Communist offensive is not yet over in northern Laos and more engagements can be expected in Cambodia before the end of the dry season, it appears certain that the next major enemy campaign will soon erupt in South Vietnam. One enemy buildup, of over three divisions, appears to be developing against the two provinces at the northern end of the country. A second, possibly more dangerous, buildup has been detected in the less well defended western highlands, where the enemy is concentrating roughly three divisions. Throughout South Vietnam there are many indications that main-force regiments, local force units and the enemy's entire guerrilla force are preparing to attack.

Enemy unit movements.

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indicate that the Communists hope to stage a major round of attacks sometime around Tet in mid-February and/or during President Nixon's visit to Communist China in late February. The dark of the moon just before Tet, which marks the beginning of the Lunar New Year, provides better cover for night attacks. The enemy presumably wants the attacks to be impressive enough to have a substantial propaganda impact before the President leaves Peking. Attacks have been delayed before by allied spoiling operations, however, and the enemy is being harassed now in many areas by

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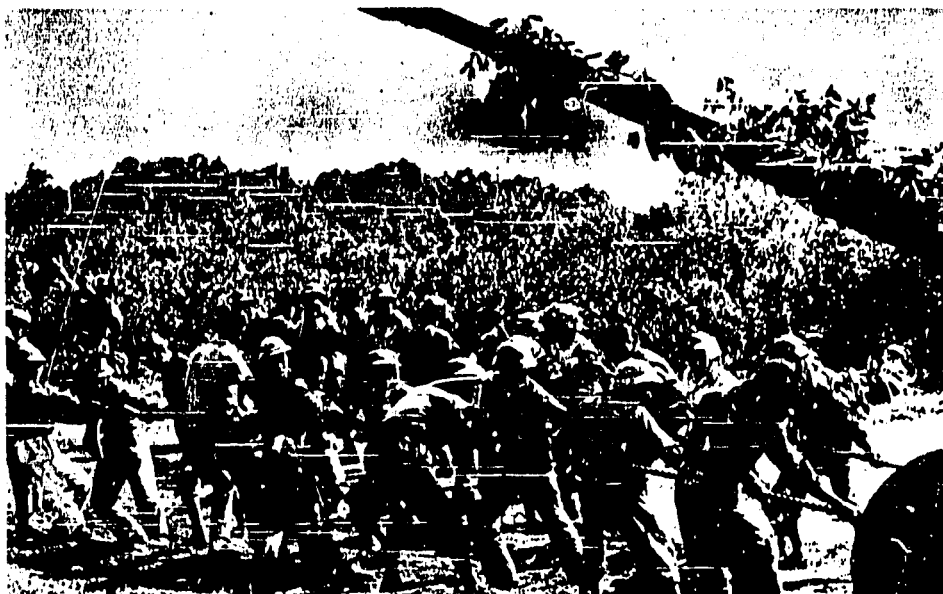
South Vietnamese forces. This may make it difficult for the Communists to get their supplies in place and to deploy their forces for attack, and as a result there could be some slippage in their timetable.

Whenever the first major round begins, the fighting may well last through May and into June. If the Communists do manage to get off a round of coordinated attacks by most of their larger units sometime in February, the fighting is likely to be sustained for a few weeks and then be followed by a somewhat quieter period during which Communist units will regroup and bring in replacements. A second offensive could follow in April or early May, at what is usually the height of the fighting season, before President Nixon visits Moscow. In addition to any such coordinated rounds, individual enemy battalions and regiments throughout South Vietnam might launch attacks independently against targets of opportunity, particularly if they find they are able to move on exposed government military positions and administrative centers. Harassing attacks by Communist mortar and rocket crews and sapper teams are likely to be a regular feature of the entire campaign period, with some of these smaller attacks grouped into what the enemy calls "high points" in order to achieve impact in the world's headlines. Most of the heavier fighting, however, will probably taper off in May when the annual southwest monsoon approaches.

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Enemy artillery is being deployed to the highlands area.



Communist support units from the 2nd Division, possibly including medical teams, are moving toward the highlands.

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Part I: The BuildupThe Central Highlands

1. The most serious threat, although not the most powerful aggregation of forces, exists along the Cambodian border opposite the central highlands. The three North Vietnamese infantry regiments and one artillery regiment that have operated in and out of Kontum and Pleiku provinces for years have recently been augmented by some 30,000 North Vietnamese reinforcements, including the 320th Division, which has just arrived on the western edge of Kontum Province. There are also some tentative signs that a few elements of the old 2nd NVA Division, which has been located in the Laotian panhandle for almost two years, may also be headed for the highlands border area, possibly to provide rear-guard support. Moreover, the 12th Regiment of the 3rd Division near the central coast has moved from northern Binh Dinh Province to a new location south of Route 19, where it threatens the eastern edges of the highlands and complicates the problems of the defenders. This is the largest force ever deployed by the enemy in the central highlands. Stockpiles of arms and ammunition in the area are already large,

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At the southern end of the highlands, where the Communists rely mostly on local forces, hundreds of enemy troops have infiltrated the Da Lat City region and may hit that important center with sapper attacks and ground assaults.

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2. The Communists are continuing to develop their roads in the Laotian panhandle and within northern South Vietnam, markedly improving their capability for moving heavy artillery, armor, and other supplies from north to south. By building roads both east and west of the mountains along the border, the Communists will be able to move supplies at any time of the year, since they will have routes available on the lee side of the mountains no matter which way the monsoon blows.

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3. Taking advantage of their improved supply system, the Communists have brought a number of 122-mm. artillery pieces to the edge of the central highlands. These weapons have a longer range (over 13 miles) than the ARVN's heavier 155-mm. pieces (over 9 miles) and will receive some protection against high-level aerial attack from the 85-mm. antiaircraft guns that also are being deployed in the area. The Communists clearly were impressed by the advantages afforded them by their heavy field pieces and strong antiaircraft barrages during Lam Son 719 last year. It is possible that Soviet military aid advisers have helped persuade the North Vietnamese to employ these weapons, particularly as US forces pull out and firepower on the government side is reduced. The recent successful use by the North Vietnamese of 130-mm. pieces against Laotian Government irregulars on the Plaine des Jarres and the appearance of surface-to-air missiles as far south as Tchepone in Laos are further indications that the enemy probably plans to support his forces in yet other theaters with heavier firepower. Moreover, this increased firepower will be more effective with the progressive Vietnamization of air support for government forces. If bombers and helicopter gunships are less effective, the ability of enemy ground forces to keep the pressure on government forces will improve, increasing the chances of overwhelming some fire support bases, for example.

4. The buildup in the highlands is all the more serious because the government forces assigned to defend Military Region 2 are among the weakest in South Vietnam, both in numbers and in demonstrated fighting prowess. Since the US 4th Infantry Division completed its withdrawal from the highlands in early 1970, the 22nd and 23rd ARVN Divisions have carried the main burden of defending the central and southern highlands respectively. The 42nd and 47th Regiments of the 22nd Division once were famous for their inclination to return every night to the safety of their well-defended bases, but in the heaviest actions in the highlands last dry season, they demonstrated real tenacity in eventually driving enemy attackers out of Fire-Support Bases Five and Six. The 23rd Division has not had much chance to show itself in heavy combat; it has not been challenged by enemy main forces for three years.

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5. The government appears to recognize its relative weakness in the highlands, however, and has sent airborne units from near Saigon as reinforcements. Additional reinforcing units are available in the capital area.

6. Some Communist cadre in Military Region 2 have been told that a serious effort is to be made to take control of much of the highlands and to seize some coastal cities. According to recently captured documents, the Communist province committee in Binh Dinh has informed cadre that now is the time to take advantage of US troop withdrawals, end the war, and overthrow the "puppet" government. The documents instruct party members to demonstrate a high sense of responsibility and sacrifice to regain control of the countryside and stimulate revolution in the cities. It seems unlikely that the enemy has sufficient local political assets to spark the desired "popular uprisings" in the cities--the Communists tried but failed to foment impressive demonstrations against President Thieu's re-election last October. Although much of the enemy's talk must be discounted as rhetoric, it seems clear that the Communists are prepared for their main forces to take considerable losses during this fighting season. Sapper attacks combined with small-unit infantry assaults are possible against military and civil installations in the urban areas along the coast.

7. The first targets likely to be hit by the enemy's main forces in the highlands are the fire-support bases strung out along the borders with Laos and Cambodia. These have been favorite objectives in recent years and a few will almost certainly come under siege again this year. Indeed, unless a few are neutralized, it will be much more difficult for the enemy to move in strength farther east toward the more populated areas. If the North Vietnamese are willing to accept severe casualties, their heavier weaponry in the highlands will improve their chances of overrunning one or more of these important bases. If they are successful, they would reap considerable psychological benefit both in South Vietnam and abroad.

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Enemy forces pose a potent threat to the northern provinces.

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8. With government forces preoccupied with defending the highlands against enemy main forces, smaller Communist units may be able to occupy at least a few small, relatively exposed district towns near the border. As has been widely reported in the press, there is a general expectation in South Vietnam that the enemy's larger units will try to seize and hold for a while one or two of the larger towns in the highlands. Kontum is most frequently mentioned because it is the most exposed of the important administrative centers in the highlands. Farther south in Military Region 2, a battalion or two might invest a section of Da Lat city or Ban Me Thuot. All the towns are vulnerable to mobile artillery attack.

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The Northern Provinces

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As in the highlands border area, the Communists keep five regiments--two artillery regiments and three infantry regiments--on station in the vicinity of the Demilitarized Zone. In addition to these regiments, three divisions could be made available for action in the two northernmost provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien.

11. The 304th NVA Division appears to be almost in place and ready to move against outlying government positions in western Quang Tri Province. It has

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operated in this area in previous years and can be resupplied by the new road the Communists have constructed into the northwest part of the province. Within a matter of days, most of the regiments of the 304th Division can probably be in position and ready to coordinate their attacks with those of the five infantry and artillery regiments permanently deployed along the DMZ.

12. The 324B Division is nearby and may already be moving to a position just south of the 304th, working in through the A Chau Valley toward its usual area of operations in western Thua Thien Province. Some battalions of the 324B could be deployed into western Thua Thien by mid-February. The 308th Division, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] may be ready for action within a very few weeks.

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13. Even during the offensives of 1968, the Communists did not send all of their large units into battle at one time; a substantial portion of them were held in reserve. It seems possible, therefore, that the 308th, instead of immediately going into battle, will be held back in the initial stages while the other units already on the scene bear the brunt of the fighting. With the US 101st Airborne and the 3rd Marine divisions withdrawn, even the highly respected 1st ARVN Division and the newly formed 3rd ARVN Division, supported by some South Vietnamese Marine reinforcements, will have their hands full holding their positions against the North Vietnamese forces.

14. Closer to the coast in Quang Nam Province, the enemy has assembled some other units, including one regiment of the old 2nd Division now in Laos, to form a new truncated division. The reorganization will facilitate the use of these units in larger actions south and southwest of Da Nang city. In addition, the Communists' 3rd Division, which has done little during the last two years and is of suspect quality as a fighting unit, is still in position to threaten the populated coast of southern Quang Ngai and Bing Dinh provinces.

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15. Enemy units trying to come into Military Region 1 will face the same immediate problem as those trying to enter Military Region 2: they must first neutralize or otherwise get past the string of outlying strongpoints manned by South Vietnamese defenders. The Communist commanders nevertheless are telling their troops that they must drive toward the coast and seize and hold Quang Tri city and other urban centers there. In [redacted] captured documents, enemy cadre once again are being called upon in the same urgent tones that were employed in 1968 to prepare to foment popular uprisings in the cities. [redacted]

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16. The enemy does not appear to have been able to maintain very strong local forces in Quang Tri or Thua Thien provinces. As a result, the Communists' chances of raiding a major city or investing some district towns along the coast of those provinces will probably depend heavily on the success their main-force regiments achieve in getting past the 1st and 3rd ARVN divisions. On the other hand, in Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces of Military Region 2, the enemy still has fairly strong local forces to use against such cities as Da Nang, Hoi An, and Tuy Hoa. At the very least, these urban centers are vulnerable to rocket, mortar, and sapper attacks. Some of them could also be partially invested for a time if the enemy is willing to pay a high price in casualties among that increasingly scarce asset, the hard-core local cadre who know the territory.

17. There is no doubt that the Communists' local-support apparatus and guerrilla forces are weaker today than in 1968 and that the enemy lacks the large main-force units available within the

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country in 1968. If, however, the Communists are willing to keep boring in while taking severe losses, exactly as they did in 1968, they are capable of inflicting heavy damage on many of the well-defended centers and positions along the coast. Because the political impact of such assaults, in terms of headlines around the world, would be great, the Communists may be willing to accept some setbacks to the local rebuilding program they have been emphasized for the last three years.

Around Saigon

18. The shift of some airborne reserve units from Military Region 3 to the highlands has already caused considerable concern in Military Region 3, and this helps account for the sudden withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from Cambodia to aid in defending the provinces around Saigon. The withdrawal was so precipitous that the Cambodians, given no time to reinforce their own units at Krek, had to evacuate the area in relative disorder.

19. The North Vietnamese 5th, 7th, and 9th divisions are all in Cambodia, away from South Vietnam's borders. The 7th and 9th have been regrouping and refitting after taking substantial punishment in the heavy engagements in October with ARVN forces defending the Tay Ninh Province border and in the more recent air attacks against them along Route 6 in Cambodia. They are not threatening South Vietnam now, but regiments from these divisions could begin to move toward Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuoc Long provinces at any time. Two additional Communist regiments have been moving south through Cambodia toward the area where the 5th, 7th, and 9th divisions are located, and it is possible that the two new regiments could free other units for action in South Vietnam.

20. There have been reports that the Communists would like to seize Tay Ninh city and that they expect to mount strong attacks in the adjacent province of Binh Duong and in the vicinity of the Hau Nghia - Long An province border. The 25th ARVN Division,

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supported by locally available reserves, seems to be in a fairly strong position in this area, however, and any Communist effort to capture Tay Ninh city would probably prove a very costly failure for them, even if it seriously damaged the city. The more remote towns and military positions in Binh Long and Phuoc Long provinces, which are defended by the not very highly regarded 5th ARVN Division, would probably make more realistic targets for the enemy divisions now in Cambodia.

21. Farther south in Military Region 3, the Communists have two regiments in Long Khanh Province, well to the east of Saigon, and two or three regiments immediately available in the provinces north-west of Saigon. The enemy has been making some inroads against local security in several provinces near Saigon. Although the threat is fairly limited, the political importance of protecting Saigon and the surrounding area from attack has prompted the commander of Region 3, General Minh, to withdraw his forces from the Route 7 operation in Cambodia, and he has sent many units on searches through the countryside looking for enemy caches and units. Saigon, Bien Hoa, and other major centers are likely to be shelled and attacked by sapper units, but the three ARVN divisions in Military Region 3, the extensive territorial security forces, and the local reserves are probably adequate to defend the capital city against any likely ground attack.

22. The capital might be endangered if the Communist High Command's instructions to the troops are to be taken literally and the enemy is indeed willing to see its own forces decimated in a convulsive attempt to drive into the cities and "end the war now." Costly attacks in the highlands and then along the northern coast could be undertaken to draw off as many reserves as possible from around Saigon, and a three-division drive might then be launched out of Cambodia toward Saigon. This course of action seems highly unlikely, since the chances are good that the South Vietnamese defenders would repel the Communists as they did in 1968, even without the substantial

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The enemy threat in the delta has diminished, but is still troublesome.

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American help that was available then. The Communists probably would be so weakened by high casualties that their chances for victory within the next few years would be greatly reduced.

The Delta

23. The enemy threat in the delta, Military Region 4, is substantially less than in any of the other three regions to the north--as it has been throughout the last three years. The balance of forces weighs heavily against the Communists. The enemy has three regiments holed up in the U Minh Forest and four others scattered across the delta, and the government's three divisions and its numerous territorial security forces seem more than a match for them. There have been some rumors that another Communist regiment has come from Cambodia to the northern border of the region, but so far there has been no solid evidence to support these assertions.

24. In spite of its relatively weak position in the delta, the enemy is still capable of mounting a number of troublesome attacks there to give the appearance of a countrywide offensive. A reduction in Viet Cong terrorist incidents in November and December throughout the country suggests that many Viet Cong local assets have been training and preparing for an outburst of coordinated activity sometime soon. In addition, there have been indications that enemy troops in some parts of the delta have been celebrating Tet early in order to free that holiday in mid-February for more serious business. Both the decline in terrorist incidents and the reports of early celebrations are reminiscent of the preparations for the Tet 1968 offensive.

25. [redacted] the enemy hopes to invest several major cities in the delta, such as Can Tho, Phu Vinh, My Tho and Ben Tre. Some of the planned attacks in these major centers are intended to hit specific government installations, such as headquarters compounds, rather than to set off the kind of indiscriminate street fighting that characterized the 1968 offensives.

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26. As the action in the delta--as well as elsewhere in South Vietnam--increases, local government security forces will probably become much more cautious and Communist local forces will be more free to move about the countryside. In this situation, many delta district towns will probably be shelled by local guerrilla teams, and security outposts protecting bridges and the edges of villages could be overwhelmed by enemy local-force units.

Coordination of Attacks

27. Propaganda considerations aside, the Communists probably will try to coordinate the timing of their attacks in different parts of the country to make it more difficult for the government to send reinforcements from one area to another. This was their plan in 1968, but they attacked so many targets at roughly the same time that their forces were usually spread too thin to do the job in any one place. The Communists often are inflexible and have difficulty learning from their mistakes, but they may take greater care this time to concentrate their forces against fewer, but still widely scattered, government positions.

28. The Communists clearly are preparing for heavy action, particularly in the north, but at this juncture it is difficult for them to know how successful they will be against the million or so South Vietnamese defending the south with American air support, and thus how much of their strategy can be implemented. In any event, they are ready to test the South Vietnamese more vigorously than at any time since Vietnamization began in 1969.

29. The sheer number of attacks will probably produce many headlines in the world's press. Many relatively small attacks, in combination with main-force actions, could do much to discourage government officials and security forces at the local level. This is what the enemy is hoping for at a minimum, but if the Communist divisions are kept at a distance from the country's main centers and government security forces manage to cope with the lesser attacks, the South Vietnamese may get through the difficult days ahead relatively unscathed and may emerge more confident in themselves than before.

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Part II: Enemy Problems and OpportunitiesThe Enemy Looks at the Big Unit War

30. As enemy divisions have moved back once again for another dry-season campaign in South Vietnam, more than one war-weary observer has commented that nothing has changed after all the years of fighting. This perhaps understandable observation is far from the truth, however. A great deal has changed. The most important single difference being weighed by Communist military planners is the departure of US forces from the battlefields of South Vietnam. Despite the increased effectiveness of South Vietnamese government forces, there are fewer reserves to be shared by the four South Vietnamese military region commanders, and there is substantially less fire-power to be deployed against the enemy--particularly on the ground--since US artillery, armor, and helicopters have pulled out by the hundreds. With the Communists' great confidence in their superior toughness and will to persist, the enemy clearly believes that US withdrawals offer new opportunities this year.

31. On the other hand, with the departure of US forces, Communist claims that they are fighting "the imperialists" and that South Vietnamese forces are only "puppet stooges" are less persuasive. As the South Vietnamese Army and the rest of the government's forces defend South Vietnam against a Communist take-over without help of US ground forces, the confidence of both sides has to be affected. Clearly, the Communists need a few "crushing victories," as they like to call them, to shake the confidence of the South Vietnamese Government and its forces and to strengthen their own.

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33. The Communists have noted this trend, and the chances are good that they will give high priority to inflicting heavy casualties on South Vietnam's Army and other security forces. The Communists need some successes because in recent years there have been few engagements in South Vietnam toward which they could point with pride, and because there are indications that many Viet Cong cadre have ceased to believe their commanders' assurances of Communist superiority.

The Local Force Struggle for the Countryside

34. During 1970 and 1971 Communist main-force units were conspicuously absent from South Vietnam while they concentrated on rebuilding and defending their lines of supply and base positions in Cambodia and Laos. This allowed the South Vietnamese to enjoy a very favorable local balance of power in most regions of South Vietnam. Although few government units have performed with much distinction, the overwhelming numerical superiority of the government forces and the sheer numbers of their outposts and patrols have badly constricted many of the enemy's local assets during this period. As a result, government security forces are more confident and operate more aggressively, except when the enemy is known to be present in some strength.

35. The Communists have been extremely concerned over the deterioration of their position in the South, and throughout 1970 and 1971 they put the highest priority on rebuilding their local control and support apparatus and regaining greater contact with the people. It is impossible to state just how successful they have been. But there are some tell-tale symptoms in some places--such as the large number of abductions of villagers by enemy teams operating in parts of Military Region 2 and the heavy reliance which government security forces there place on large booby traps to counter Viet Cong squads moving along jungle trails. These incidents strongly suggest that government security operations in such areas are timid and that enemy operations at the local level have become bolder.

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from north of Saigon in Military Region 3 the enemy is more active than is reported through official South Vietnamese Government channels. Many small enemy attacks go unmentioned simply because they would reflect badly on the local officials' performance. The enemy apparatus is still suffering badly from the effects of pacification in many areas, such as the delta, but Communist cadre are returning again to some hamlets that had been unsafe for them during much of 1970 and early 1971. In these villages they are taxing, propagandizing, recruiting, and securing help from sympathizers for small-scale operations against the local bureaucracy and security forces.

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36. These efforts to rebuild the Communist infrastructure and the local guerrilla forces would be greatly encouraged if the enemy's main forces return in strength to South Vietnam. An easing of their operating environment would provide local Viet Cong cadre and guerrillas with many more opportunities to regain their old vigor.

37. However the Communists shape their strategy, they will probably take care to preserve the key elements of the local apparatus they have been working so hard to rebuild. From the enemy's point of view, one of the terrible costs of the 1968 offensive was the loss of so many hard-to-replace local officers who "knew the territory." It takes years of indoctrination and experience to develop the kind of dedicated, knowledgeable cadre who are the backbone of the Communist organization in the South.

38. The Communists have an almost religious faith in their basic doctrine of protracted struggle, which repeatedly asserts that the local apparatus organized among the villagers is the foundation of the whole effort. The enemy cannot envisage sustaining many divisions in different parts of South Vietnam without the help of a local support apparatus. This "infrastructure" is important both to the long-term effort to hold the Communist movement in the South together and to give it direction while the Communists are trying to disrupt the government's political forces. The Communists have always believed that one of their most important advantages

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is their close contact with the people. Thus, although many cadre are being told to prepare for an all-out effort, it seems highly probable that the enemy will avoid attacks such as those that wrought such havoc with the infrastructure in 1968.

Political Considerations

39. The Communists will find little of comfort in reviewing the past year's political developments in South Vietnam. Despite the adverse overseas reaction to the presidential election, within South Vietnam the Thieu regime has looked stronger and has shown more confidence than ever. Even the so-called "militant" An Quang Buddhists, whom the Communists would like to exploit, have recognized the government's increased strength and have decided to work within the system rather than embark on a policy of confrontation. Before the 3 October election,

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indicated that the Communists hoped to foment a far more acrimonious brand of militant opposition among the legal political forces arrayed against Thieu. Since then, there have been indications that the Communists privately admit failure to themselves. They appear to have abetted a few small incidents staged by militant students, but there is little evidence that they have the political assets in the cities capable of sparking the "popular uprisings" that are mentioned with increasing frequency in enemy indoctrination courses for this winter-spring campaign. The most useful political assets are those undetected by allied intelligence, and the enemy could be hoarding some expert agents provocateurs or skeleton fronts to employ at the right time. Based on the available evidence, however, mass agitation does not appear to be one of the more promising options available in the near future, despite the talk of "uprisings" in captured Communist documents.

Peking, Moscow, and Washington

40. The factors influencing Communist strategy this year involve not only Indochina but also Peking, Moscow, and Washington. Assurances from their allies notwithstanding, the Vietnamese Communists are almost

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certainly concerned that President Nixon's visits to Peking and Moscow may somehow lead to a diminution of support from the two Communist powers, and Hanoi is aware that this is an election year in the United States. Being great believers in the importance of the display of battlefield strength while negotiations and major political developments are under way, the North Vietnamese will probably put a high premium on trying to undercut President Nixon as much as possible by mounting a creditable offensive. The objective will be to shake the confidence of both South Vietnamese and Americans and to convince Hanoi's allies that the situation does not require basic concessions to President Nixon.

41. It is possible that the latest allied peace proposals will cause the Communists to delay or modify their plans for an offensive in South Vietnam, but field reporting of the last few days from South Vietnam reflects no slowdown in enemy battle preparations. On the contrary, the Communists apparently continue to believe that whatever they may decide to do in the diplomatic field can only be aided by successes on the battlefield.

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